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SUBJECT: PM DZUNG'S ONLINE CHAT: POWER TO THE PEOPLE?

REF: HANOI 02996

Classified By: P/C Marc Knapper for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 9, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dzung went online for over two hours to answer questions on a variety of topics, including corruption, the economy, the media and even his personal life. The GVN says the Internet chats are geared toward increasing its "transparency of operations." The online sessions have drawn positive local reviews, although one leading reform advocate sees the number of questions submitted before Dzung's chat -- reportedly close to 20,000 -- as signaling that the GVN is not meeting the needs of the public and that Vietnamese crave even more freedom to speak their minds. End Summary.

Taking the Pulse Via Cyberspace

¶2. (SBU) On February 9, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dzung went online to answer questions on a variety of topics, including corruption, the economy, the media and even his personal life. Dzung answered questions preselected from about 20,000 sent from across Vietnam and overseas. The PM also fielded a few live queries during the over two-hour event, the second in an ongoing series the GVN has planned to increase its "transparency of operations." Late last year, former Deputy Prime Minister (and current foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister) Vu Khoan took part in the first online forum.

¶3. (SBU) The online event ventured into somewhat uncharted territory. Vietnamese leaders traditionally hold personal information tightly, but Dzung did not shirk from answering questions about his son's study in the United States, saying the Ministry of Education "sent" him there on a scholarship. The Prime Minister also took a question on why he signed a decree on the press (reftel) that goes against the "goal of freedom and democracy that the GVN is striving for." Dzung defended the decision by claiming that the "majority" of Vietnamese agree with it and believe that the press should support it. Dzung also said that the press has an obligation to put out the truth and that its "mistakes" must be "seriously punished." He added that the recent decree on the press is in keeping with Vietnamese law.

But Does It Go Far Enough?

¶4. (SBU) The Prime Minister seized on the many questions about corruption -- arguably one of the most pressing issues for the public and an issue in which the Party has granted the public and press some leeway to comment on -- to burnish his anti-graft credentials. Dzung asserted that no matter who is corrupt, or what positions they hold, his government

will hold them to account. He responded to an innocuous question on his likes and dislikes by alluding to corruption, saying he "loved honesty and hated cheating the most."

¶5. (C) Le Dan Dzoanh, a leading reform advocate, told Poloff the online forums are a welcome development. (Note: Dzoanh is senior economist at the Ministry of Planning and Investment and former economic adviser to Vietnam's first communist premier, Pham Van Dong. In 2005, Dzoanh's advice to the Politburo on the need for deeper political reforms leaked to the media. End Note.) However, Dzoanh said that the sheer volume of questions submitted before Dzung's chat "indirectly means that the GVN is not meeting the needs of the people." He said that the GVN must have more dialogues with the public, and that these dialogues must lead to "results," such as clear improvement in public services. No GVN leader should underestimate the "frustrations" of the public, Dzoanh added.

¶6. (C) Comment: The Prime Minister's webchat comes nine days after Ambassador Marine's own two-hour online interview, and the broad range of questions that both received indicates a public curiosity that is perhaps inadequately satisfied by existing Vietnamese media outlets. While it was not unusual that the PM's incoming questions were prescreened -- PAS staff reviewed the hundreds of queries posed to the Ambassador during his webchat to find interesting or relevant topics -- it is notable that the Prime Minister and his handlers chose to address issues infrequently addressed by government leaders. PM Dzung's willingness to go online indicates both a recognition of the growing power of the Internet in Vietnam and a pragmatic attempt to feed a public hunger for information and answers. End Comment.
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